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Nicaragua Rebels Getting Advice From White House on Operations

National Security Council Aides Reportedly Help To Raise Money Too From Private Sources

The following dispatch is based on reporting by Joel Brinkley and Shirley Christian and was written by Mr. Brinkley.

WASHINGTON, Aug. 7 — Rebels fighting to overthrow the Nicaraguan Government have been receiving direct military advice from White House officials on the National Security Council, senior Administration officials and members of Congress have disclosed.

A senior Administration official said the direction had included advice and "tactical influence" on the rebels' military operations as well as help in raising money from private sources.

The officials and lawmakers said the direct White House involvement in the rebels' operations against Nicaragua

began last year after Congress ended United States military aid to the rebels. Congress has since agreed to send the rebels \$27 million in nonmilitary assistance.

Although some members of Congress say they believe the National Security Council operation has flouted the intent of legislation banning direct aid to the rebels, they add that they do not believe it violates United States laws.

"If the President wants to use the N.S.C. to operate a war in Nicaragua, I don't think there's any way we can control it," said Representative George E. Brown Jr., Democrat of California and a member of the House Select Committee on Intelligence. He and other intelligence committee members said they had discussed the operation, "but," Mr. Brown added, "we haven't taken any formal action."

In Contact With the C.I.A.

The operation has been run by a military officer who is a member of the National Security Council. Officials said the officer, who has extensive experience in intelligence work, meets frequently with rebel leaders in Washington and on trips to Central America and briefs President Reagan. He also gives frequent speeches and lectures on the subject of Nicaragua and, when asked, advises people on how they might donate money to the rebel cause.

A senior White House official said today that the officer was "a very important player."

In an interview today, a senior Administration official who has discussed the matter with the officer said he was in frequent contact with the Central Intelligence Agency, the State Department and the Defense Department as part of his work with the Nicaraguan rebels. The rebels, the official said, "are his account."

Private Donations Encouraged

"There's a lot of frustration within the White House," he added, "because they do not believe the N.S.C. is the logical place to manage the program. The staff is too small."

White House officials have been telling members of Congress this week that they are planning to set up a new agency associated with the State Department to administer the \$27 million in renewed, nonmilitary aid to the rebels that Congress approved last week.

Representative Dave McCurdy, Democrat of Oklahoma and a member of the intelligence committee, said White House officials had told him that

the new office would be called the Agency for Humanitarian Assistance. It is unclear who will serve on the new agency's staff, although the White House has assured Mr. McCurdy and others that neither C.I.A. nor Defense Department officials will be included. The legislation authorizing the new aid forbids direct involvement by anyone from those agencies.

Before Congress approved renewed aid, the Administration was forbidden to assist the rebels directly and as a result the White House encouraged private donors in the United States and abroad to give money to the effort. A senior Administration official said the rebels had collected \$20 million in the last year.

Another senior official who has talked with the officer said he played an indirect role in the fund raising.

"He never quite asked anyone for money for the contras," he said, using the name by which the rebels are generally known. "He has given numerous speeches and briefings on the subject.

And if in the course of those briefings someone wanted to know how to assist them, as a normal course of his answering questions he has facilitated that."

State Dept. Confusion Reported

The officer would not agree to an interview today. But another senior N.S.C. official said in a recent interview that the National Security Council had taken a leading role in directing the Administration's Nicaragua policy last year because of confusion at the State Department. However, the official did not acknowledge that the office had been directing the rebel forces.

"There was so much fighting over there" at the State Department "that the action items were grabbed up by the N.S.C., mainly the trade embargo and contra aid."

Often in past administrations, covert actions like the aid to the Nicaraguan rebels have been isolated from the White House, giving the President and his staff what came to be known as "plausible deniability" of the programs. But the National Security Council is an Executive Branch agency with offices in the White House and across the street in the Old Executive Office Building.

Still, within the White House the program was not managed as most N.S.C. programs are, a former senior White House official said today.

"It was not handled through the crisis management apparatus," he said.

The former official recalled asking the officer on the N.S.C. a few months ago where the money for the rebels was coming from. "I never got an answer," he said.

Meetings With Rebels Reported

The former official, who has extensive experience in intelligence matters, said the N.S.C. program had not been operated under the specific rules and procedures of the Presidential executive order that covers covert intelligence operations. "They found a way around it," he said.

Officials said the officer on the National Security Council often meets with Adolfo Calero, leader of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, the largest rebel group, and with Arturo Cruz, another opposition leader.

A Nicaraguan exile leader with close ties to the rebels said the officer was "a very important man" in the continuing efforts to reorganize and better coordinate the operations of the two main rebel groups, the Nicaraguan Democratic Force in Honduras and the Democratic Revolutionary Alliance in Costa Rica. The officer has met with rebel leaders in both countries, officials said.

The officer also attends numerous functions for and about the Nicaraguan resistance in Washington and elsewhere.

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'A Worker Bee'

A senior Administration official called the officer "a worker bee," adding that "you know our policy is to support them," referring to the rebels, "and that's his job."

The officer does "whatever is allowed by law," the senior official said. After Congress forbade C.I.A. involvement with the rebels last year, he added, "when the right people can't manage the operation, you have to look for other alternatives."

Another source who has been directly involved in Central America policy decisions over the last several years said that after Congress cut off aid, "then in came a flux of guys with their hearts in the right place, people not in government who were willing to help" by donating money, and all that had to be coordinated.

A senior Administration official involved with Nicaraguan matters said the officer on the N.S.C. had on occasion been advised in advance of proposed rebel attacks and had offered advice and direction.

He cited as an example an attack early last month on the Enrique Campbell Express ferryboat that travels between El Rama and Bluefields in southeastern Nicaragua. The Nicaraguan Government announced after the attack that Sandinista soldiers who had been on the boat had fought back and that four of them had been kidnapped, two had been killed and one had been wounded.

Rebel Buildup Expected

Officials said the officer also had facilitated the supplying of logistical help. Until Congress ended aid to the rebels last year, the C.I.A. had managed almost every aspect of their activities. But when left to their own devices, the rebels "couldn't manage themselves very well," a senior official said. "All of a sudden they had to create logistical supply lines, and they had real problems."

Now that Congress has approved renewed aid to the rebels and the operation is to be moved to a new State Department agency, a senior official said the Administration hoped to build the rebel armies from their present combined strength of about 20,000 "to 35,000 in the next six months."